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ENGLISH LITERATURE'S DEBT TO THE BIBLE

BY WILLIAM GILMER PERRY

THE history of English literature begins and ends with the name of God. The opening verses of Caedmon, the first of English bards, chant the praises of the Almighty Maker of all things; the last words of Tennyson and Browning, who close the long line of imperial torch-bearers, sound the pæan of faith triumphant; and, like a golden thread through the entire web of our literature, runs the influence of the English Bible.

This influence may be definitely recognized as threefold—first, upon the thought and spirit of our literature; second, upon its language; third, upon its content.

To trace the first influence is difficult; it is as if one should attempt to distinguish the dye from the fabric that it colors. Literature is an expression of life; and the very essence of Anglo-Saxon civilization is the spirit and thought that finds its supreme expression in the Bible.

To distinguish its influence upon the language is scarcely less difficult, except where—as in the work of De Quincey and Ruskin—there is a strongly marked echo, in word and cadence, of Biblical phraseology. In much the same manner as its spirit has entered into our life, has its speech entered into our language. The age of Chaucer produced Wyclif's translation, and that of Shakespeare the Authorized Version; the English Bible presided over the birth of our language, and did much to determine our speech to-day. Nor has its influence been less conserving than formative. During the eighteenth century, when under the artificiality of Pope and the classicism of Johnson, the very genius of our tongue seemed threatened with disaster, the Bible remained the one unchanging standard of English diction. This Book held our speech true to its orbit; not merely was checked

this movement away from its standards, but with ever-accelerating speed we are returning toward them.

The third influence of the Bible, that upon the content of our literature, is more readily traced. From the first, the noble directness and idyllic charm of the Scriptural narratives made a powerful appeal to the literary artist, and there has grown up a large and increasingly important body of literature that has sought its subject matter in the pages of the Old and New Testaments. This choice of subject sometimes appears directly, as in "Samson Agonistes" or "Saul." More often, however, it appears indirectly, in the form of allusion, as in "Rizpah" or "The Cottar's Saturday Night."

It is to be expected that during the period preceding the Norman Conquest the greater part of the literary output in England should have drawn largely upon the Bible narrative; for not only was there a great dearth of literary material, but most of the writing came from the shadows of the cloister. It is interesting, however, to see how much earlier the stories of the Bible were taken into our literature than its spirit. The delight of these old authors in the overthrow of Pharaoh and the bloody tale of Judith shows how close they still were to their Viking ancestors; and such a story as "The Harrowing of Hell" indicates how entirely they failed to understand the nature and mission of Jesus. Still, even when the Normans came and brought with them their vast wealth of tales of knightly quest, the Bible remained an exhaustless storehouse of literary subject. The *Cursor Mundi*, which in flowing verse tells the story of God's dealing with men from the creation till the final redemption, consciously and avowedly competes for the favor of its readers with the chivalric adventures of "The Song of Roland" and of "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight"; and the most perfect piece of writing of this pre-Chaucerian era, that exquisite expression of a father's grief for his little Margaret called *The Pearl*, turns to the Apocalypse for a vision of the dwelling-place beyond the dark river that might have served Bunyan for the model of his Celestial City. Of even greater significance are the Miracle and Morality plays, which had their beginning during these years,—those wonderful animate illustrations of the sacred text that for two and a half centuries before Shakespeare served not only to develop the dramatic sense of the English populace, but to

render vividly familiar to them the incident of the Bible and its ethical content.

During the latter part of the fourteenth century, English literature became not only more finished in form, but deeper and broader in spirit and content. The dominant figure of this period is Chaucer. In his work the influence of the Bible is patent, despite his intense reverence for the Italian masters. Besides minor Scriptural allusions and references, he has left as the most enduring of that wonderful portrait gallery of Canterbury Pilgrims the nobly inspiring picture of the Poor Parson. Moreover, this was the age of Langland and "Piers the Plowman." Hopelessly uncouth and confused as is "The Vision" to the modern reader, it was probably far more widely known at that time than was Chaucer's gallery of fourteenth-century worthies; and here one finds merely an elaborate symbol of the Christ story which concludes with a joyous ringing of the Easter Bells. A third figure of this age, whose importance in English literature is rarely recognized, is John Wyclif. Chaucer is commonly credited with having taken the fluid, rapidly changing English of the fourteenth century and given it definite form and comparative fixity. We seldom consider to what extent Wyclif's Bible, rather than "The Canterbury Tales," may be the real well of English undefiled which is the source of the speech of modern England. Chaucer wrote for a limited aristocratic circle, and his manuscripts circulated little outside the confines of the court. Wyclif wrote for the great body of middle-class Englishmen, and touched the life of the poorest peasant. His barefoot, russet-clad priests, wandering through the length and breadth of the land, carried with them their precious manuscript, bringing to their hearers the living truths in a living tongue and literally putting a new song into their mouths. The effects of the Lollard Movement on the English tongue cannot be easily estimated; and it is not surprising that, when at last the great inarticulate masses found a voice, its first utterance should be *The Pilgrim's Progress*.

The century and a half following the death of Chaucer in 1400, with its dreary record of literary achievement, was a period of preparation. The stream of English literature dived underground, to gather the power which should enable it to reissue during the latter Tudor period as a fountain of light, when in the mid-years of Elizabeth's reign

the genius of the English race burst full blossomed. The period of the Tudors was the great age of Biblical translation. In 1526 Tyndale gave his translation to the world; then, in rapid succession, appeared the translations of Coverdale and the Geneva scholars, the Great Bible of Cranmer, the Rheims and Douay versions, and others of less importance, culminating in the translation of 1611. In this last year appeared the Authorized Version; and England possessed one single great and enduring work of prose,—the noblest example of the English tongue, says John Richard Green, which from the instant of its appearance became the standard of our language. Before fifty years had passed, this book had made its way into the hearts of the English people; hundreds of its phrases had been absorbed bodily into the daily speech; and the combined simplicity, dignity, and music of its phrase had interpenetrated and become an essential element of English prose.

Before 1611, the influence noted had been that of the Bible rather than that of the English Bible. It had been largely due, at first, to a paucity of literary material and the influence of the Church upon the writers; then, to the deeply religious impulse that actuated the author. From this time on, the source of influence was to be largely a literary one; and we may pause to seek the reasons why this book should have affected so profoundly all of our nobler forms of letters,—our poetry, drama, fiction, oratory, and essays.

There are, inherent in the Bible, certain qualities, independent of translation, that make it a source of powerful emotional impulse. In the first place, its substance is essentially poetic. A considerable part of it is definitely lyrical, as in the Psalter and the numerous songs embedded in its narrative portions; an even larger part is filled with the ecstasy of vision, as in the prophetic books and the Apocalypse; its narratives have uniformly an epic or idyllic quality that is rarely found in secular history or fiction; its wisdom books and philosophical essays are never distinctively logical and constantly flash into purple passages that make their appeal solely to the feelings; even its stretches of law and ritual are filled with a warmth of color more in harmony with the scented pages of the poet than with the arid codes of the lawgiver. In the second place, this emotional pulsing is made more noticeable by the form of the Hebrew

sentence, a quality that has been faithfully preserved in the translation. The Hebrew tongue is notably deficient in those subordinating particles which make possible the rolling periods of the Greek and the Latin. As a result, its sentences consist of single propositions that are short and vary little in length. This gives to its prose a rhythmic beat not unlike the swing of the verse in our poetic composition. A third striking quality of the Hebrew is its total lack of abstract words; hence, abstract thought and emotion can find expression only through concrete terms, and constant recourse is had to figurative language to make such expression possible. This quality may be illustrated by a single passage, the first three verses of the 69th Psalm:

"Save me, O God; for the waters are come in unto my soul. I sink in deep mire, where there is no standing; I am come into the deep waters, where the floods overflow me. I am weary of my crying: my throat is dried: my eyes fail while I wait for my God."

In this short passage, where the writer is attempting to convey the abstract idea of helpless despair, it is apparent how, by piling image on image and appealing always to the reader's senses and imagination, the writer wins a vividness and force that could never be his were the appeal directed only to the intellect.

Besides all this, it was the good fortune of the Bible to be translated into English at the only time in our history when these emotional qualities could have received adequate expression. At that time, the Anglo-Saxon element of the language had attained a complete development, and sufficient of the Latin had been absorbed directly or through the French to give this native element an added richness and harmony; but the language had not yet become filled with our present array of colorless abstract terms derived from classical sources. It, therefore, resembled the Hebrew in its constant recourse to concrete and figurative speech for the purpose of expressing abstractions. Through the translation of Tyndale, which is the basis of all the later important translations, the Authorized Version derives a special canorous quality from the Latin Vulgate; still, the directness, simplicity, concreteness, vigor, and dignity of the English Bible are essentially Anglo-Saxon. Moreover, the translators wrote at a time when English words still were shining symbols fresh from the mint of language and

not the mere "faded metaphors" that pass current among us to-day. Finally, the translators worked in that period when the religious conflict of England was most acute and intense. To Tyndale and Coverdale, translation was something far other than a literary exercise; their work was a service to God, involving the gravest eternal consequences; it was done in exile, with the fate of martyrdom full fronting them; and every line from their pen throbbed with the rhythm of heroic self-sacrifice and sublime devotion.

The literary period which wears the name of the Virgin Queen extends about twenty years on each side of the date of the Authorized Version, so that only about one-half of this period could have felt its influence; still, the popularity of the earlier translations was enormous, and it is at first glance surprising that their influence is so little seen in Elizabethan literature. It is true that Spenser's "Faerie Queene" is essentially an elaborate allegory of the soul's striving after perfection; and Bishop Wordsworth's careful examination of Shakespeare's plays reveals about one hundred and twenty definite allusions to the Bible. In these same plays, however, there are certainly an equal number of allusions to Law or Medicine or Navigation and a much larger number to Renaissance Italy; while among Shakespeare's contemporaries, with the exception of the philosophers and theologians, reference to the Bible is singularly lacking. This may be partly accounted for by the fact that the playwrights, who gave the most characteristic utterance to Elizabethan thought, were, because of their social condition, the class least likely to come under the influence of the Bible. A more adequate explanation seems that these Elizabethans were true children of the Renaissance, in thrall to the glamour of life and the glitter of its pageantry. Added to this was a new and vivid consciousness of their national greatness. These qualities led them naturally to seek their inspiration in the romantic pages of *Hakluyt's Voyages* and *Holinshed's Chronicles*, and especially in the numerous translations of the Italian *novelle* and Spanish rogue stories then newly come to England; and when, intoxicated with romance and patriotism, they turned to the ancients, it was the glow of Plutarch and Virgil, rather than the severer beauties of the Bible, that claimed their interest.

After the death of Elizabeth, the Bible underwent a grave misfortune. It ceased to be the book of a nation and became

the tract of a sect, and that sect one which seems amazingly blind to its value as mere literature. Insisting upon a literal inspiration and devoting their energies to minute dissection of obscure texts, they lost the sense of its literary greatness; grubbing in dark corners and cobwebbed crypts, they lost sight of the grandeur of the whole edifice, through whose painted windows flamed the splendors of a glory eternal. Yet it must not be forgotten that this was the era of Bunyan and Milton. These two—one in prose, the other in verse—gave Puritanism its noblest expression; and both based this expression on the English Bible. *The Pilgrim's Progress* of the former became and remains the most widely known of English secular books. The *Paradise Lost* of the latter is, indeed, in a fair way to join the ranks of those classics which "every one praises and no one reads," but its influence persists in a way and to a degree that few realize; for it is Milton, and not Revelation, that has created the particular concepts of Hell and Heaven and Satan and God which even to-day are not infrequently accepted in the pew and taught from the pulpit. Nor must one forget the *Temple* of George Herbert and the *Noble Numbers* of Robert Herrick, or the quaint beauties of Giles Fletcher and the baffling music of John Donne, or the mystic passion of Crashaw and Henry Vaughan—incense wafted from the hallowed altars of their lives.

During the so-called Augustan Age, covering the last quarter of the seventeenth century and the first three-quarters of the eighteenth, English literature shows comparatively little influence of the Bible. This has been accounted for solely by the fact that the Puritans had monopolized it for their own purposes. This explanation seems hardly sufficient; the Bible is powerful enough to have surmounted this difficulty had not one more formidable lain in its way. This greater obstacle was the nature of the eighteenth-century literature. Whereas the Bible is simple, concrete, dignified, and profoundly emotional, the writing of the eighteenth century is artificial, abstract, trivial, and commonplace. The entire spirit of the century was antagonistic to that of the Bible; the writers were constitutionally incapable of feeling its appeal. It is true that Pope, the dominant figure of this era, bases one of his most popular poems, the "Messiah," on those passages in Isaiah foretelling the advent of Christ, and that in his "Universal Prayer," in-

terpenetrated as it is with Scriptural thought and phrase, he gives the profoundest expression of his personality; nor can we think of his deistic Essay on Man as possible without an existing Bible. It is true, moreover, that the story of Absalom's revolt furnishes Dryden with the framework of his best-known satire; that Swift's *Tale of a Tub* still divides favor with his *Gulliver's Travels*; that Addison's one real poem is his paraphrase of the 19th Psalm; that Goldsmith's most enduring creations are his gentle Vicar and his godly preacher of Fair Auburn; that Defoe and Samuel Richardson are often exasperatingly moralistic; and that Johnson's work is surcharged with a noble piety. Yet the only one of the great writers of this Augustan Age who shows any real influence of the English Bible is Edmund Burke. He, indeed, consciously modeled his majestic periods on the prose of the Authorized Version, and thereby wove for his thought a garment as richly brodered as the curtains of the Sanctuary. It is noteworthy, too, that the literature of this same eighteenth century is the least interesting and inspiring of any of the great periods of English letters.

Toward the close of the century came a return to naturalness and genuineness of feeling; and when Cowper sent John Gilpin galloping merrily down to Ware, he wrought a havoc among the staid traditions of the Augustans not unlike that accomplished upon the wash at Edmonton by his doughty rider. With this new birth of sincerity, the power of the great Book began once more to be felt. Scarcely one of the heralds of the dawn of Romanticism but reflects its glory,—not only Cowper with his wistful smile, but Crabbe painting his grim gray pictures of fortune's outcasts, Blake piping down his valleys wild, and Burns singing his new song of the worth of life's common things.

The dawn which Cowper and Burns heralded became full morning when the "Lyrical Ballads" of Wordsworth and Coleridge appeared in 1798; and in both of these poets the influence of the Bible is strikingly manifest. This appears primarily in the spirit of the New Testament which permeates all of Wordsworth's poetry; it shows more directly in frequent Biblical allusion and reference throughout his longer philosophical poems. Moreover, his journal tells specifically how deeply the stories of Elijah and Elisha influenced his great "Ode on the Intimations of Immortality."

It would be sufficient, however, to cite that splendid passage in the most familiar and characteristic of all his poems, "Tintern Abbey":

"And I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things."

Here one finds a gorgeous paraphrase of the Psalmists:

"O Lord my God, thou art very great; who coverest thyself with the light as with a garment; who stretchest out the heavens like a curtain; who layeth the beams of his chambers in the waters; who maketh the clouds his chariot; who walketh upon the wings of the wind."

Nor is this influence on Coleridge less notable. Not only does it pervade his prose, but the one flawless poetic jewel in his narrow golden casket is essentially an elaborately beautiful application of Christ's "new commandment," save that Coleridge defines with a new and deeper meaning who is our "neighbor":

"He prayeth best that loveth best
All things—"

Byron, Shelley, and Keats, the three great poets who carried forward the work of Wordsworth and Coleridge, we should expect to show less powerfully the influence of the Bible,—the two former because of their antagonism toward the standards and ideals of their nation, and the last because of his aloofness from its problems. Still, when Byron seeks the most adequate expression of his personality, he goes to the story of Cain for his material, and his most widely known poems—though indeed not his greatest—are found among his "Hebrew Melodies." When Shelley writes his "Prometheus Unbound" as the final statement of his philosophical system, he merely retells the story of Golgotha under the guise of Greek myth. Even Keats, saturated though he is with the mythology of classic Greece

and the tales of Mediæval Europe, turns for his most rarely beautiful allusion to the idyl of *Ruth*. The three great essayists of this period are scarcely less imbued with this influence. Lamb shows this least. His whimsical mannerisms, indeed, seem at the farthest verge removed from the simplicity and directness of the English Bible; yet much of what is most enduring in his work is due to those echoes of other worldly music which he has derived through the confused medium of his master, Sir Thomas Browne. The most radiant passages of Hazlitt resound with the harmonies of the Authorized Version. And to realize De Quincey's indebtedness to the same source, one has only to read any dozen lines of his *Levana*:

"This is he that once I made my darling. Him I led astray, him I beguiled, and from heaven I stole away his young heart to mine. Through me did he become idolatrous; and through me it was, by languishing desires, that he worshiped the worm and prayed to the wormy grave. Holy was the grave to him; lovely was its darkness; saintly its corruption. . . . See that thy scepter lie heavy on his head. Banish the frailties of hope; wither the relenting of love; scorch the fountain of tears; curse him as only thou canst curse. So shall he be accomplished in the furnace; so shall he see the things that ought not to be seen, sights that are abominable, and secrets that are unutterable. So shall he rise again before he dies."

Here one might almost be within the presence of the ecstasy of some old Hebrew prophet—a Jeremiah or an Ezekiel.

It was, however, not until the Victorian Age, the second of the great periods of English letters, that the Bible attained its greatest potency as a literary influence; and there are obvious reasons for this fact. The Victorian Age, as none other, was consciously humanitarian and moral in its aim; it was an age of profound seriousness, and sought to penetrate into the abysses of life and to search out its meaning; it was, above all, an age of deep and sincere emotion. The emotion of the Elizabethan was the emotion of the child,—sincere but unstable, amused with the brilliant surface of life and led hither and thither by the splendor of the passing moment; that of the man of the Romantic Revival and the French Revolution was the emotion of the adolescent,—intense but uncertain of its aim; that of the Victorian was the emotion of the adult,—grave and self-contained, and advancing slowly but consciously toward a

well-defined if difficult ideal. These qualities drove the Victorian inevitably to the Bible as the ultimate expression of his spirit and ideals. This appears strikingly in the work of the three great essayists. As prophetic of the large use of Scriptural phrase that Macaulay was destined to make in his essays and addresses, one recalls his infant outburst against the maid who had disarranged the pebbles marking off his little garden: "Cursed be Sallie! For it is written, 'Cursed be he that removeth his neighbor's landmark.'" With what skill and power he later drew his weapons from the armory of the English Bible is illustrated in those terrible words wherein he sums up his indictment of Barère:

"Whatsoever things are false, whatsoever things are dishonest, whatsoever things are unjust, whatsoever things are impure, whatsoever things are hateful, whatsoever things are of evil report, if there be any vice, and if there be any infamy, all these things, we knew, were blended in Barère."

In Carlyle this influence is even more patent; in fact, so imbued is he with the Hebraic intensity that we might easily believe him the Tishbite returned to earth to scourge with prophetic vehemence the abuses of a corrupt society. Ruskin shows the same influence differently but in no less degree. The germ of his social system is found in the Sermon on the Mount; and in his *Præterita* he himself traces the sources of his style to those long Old Testament chapters which he was required in childhood to commit to memory.

The two great masters of poetry bear equally conclusive testimony to the power of the Authorized Version. Tennyson has gone to the Bible but little for the subject matter of his poems; but how constantly he has drawn upon it for purposes of allusion appears in the fact that Dr. Van Dyke has found in these poems more than four hundred Biblical references. In Browning the number of allusions is even greater. A shorter poem like "Christmas Eve" and "Easter Day" contains no less than a hundred, while in "The Ring and the Book" there are almost one thousand, which are distributed over twenty-eight books of the Old Testament and twenty-five of the New. Moreover, many of his best known and greatest poems, as the "Epistle of Karshish" and "A Death in the Desert," are based directly on Biblical subjects.

An examination of the great novelists reveals the same truth. In thinking of Scott's novels, the story that one remembers with deepest sympathy is *The Heart of Midlothian*, that rare study of Scotch peasant life which stands so close to Burns's "The Cottar's Saturday Night"; but what is here concentrated appears in all the greater novels, especially in connection with those immortal studies of the Scotch peasantry. Even more striking is the use that Thackeray makes of the Bible in his great scenes. To every lover of Thackeray there are four of these that stand out most vividly in memory: the picture of Pendennis praying beside his dying mother; that of Amelia reading the story of Samuel to her boy on the night before his departure to his grandfather; that of Esmond, returned from the Spanish War, as he stands with Lady Castlewood beneath the moon which glitters keen in the frosty air, where through, like intertissued threads of gold, are woven the lofty harmonies of the 126th Psalm; and that most poignantly beautiful picture of all, where we stand at the bedside of Colonel Newcome, while his hand feebly beats time to the chapel bell, and hear that last spoken "Adsum" as he, "whose heart was as that of a little child," stands in the presence of his Master. We commonly think of Dickens as less influenced by the Bible than were these other two, and recall Mr. Chadband and Mr. Stiggins as typical of a cynical attitude toward religion. Yet Dickens himself ascribed to the Authorized Version whatever of excellence there was in his style; moreover, his sincere humanitarianism is a direct reflection of the spirit of the New Testament. To show this indebtedness, however, it is sufficient to recall that one scene which stands supreme in all his writings and to note how it is lifted into the sublime upon the organ music of St. John. I refer to the great final act of the *Tale of Two Cities*. With Sydney Carton the struggle is over,—love hath wrought its perfect work,—and he stands before the guillotine clasping the hand of the little seamstress:

"She kisses his lips; he kisses hers; they solemnly bless each other. The spare hand does not tremble as he releases it; nothing worse than a sweet, bright constancy is in the patient face. She goes next before him—is gone; the knitting women count Twenty-Two.

"I am the Resurrection and the Life, saith the Lord: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: and whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die."

"The murmuring of many voices, the upturning of many faces, the pressing on of many footsteps in the outskirts of the crowd, so that it swells forward in a mass, like one great heave of water, all flashes away. Twenty-Three."

Since the passing of the great Victorians, English literature has moved on a lower plane,—how much lower may be judged from the deep twilight that followed the setting of Swinburne's lesser star. Its enormous increase in volume has been accompanied by a noticeable decrease in vitality. The orators and essayists are content to analyze and convince, and have forgot their power to create and inspire. The dramatists and writers of fiction have lost their sense of the universality of truth and human nature, and furnish only discussions of local and temporary problems or minute, often merely pathological, studies of individuals and narrow types. It is, however, in the poets that we feel most this decline in vigor. Other men of letters may give the plan of the battle, but it is the voice of the poet that calls us to action; the old legend of Tyrtæus is eternally and universally true. It is not that these more recent poets are mere spinners of bright-hued fancies; many of them are finished craftsmen and some inspired singers; but they lack the power to compel. Their voice is the voice of weakness. The burden of life is too heavy for them. They have ceased to summon us to the conflict; and though the fire of defiance still linger in their eye, they have laid their trumpets by and confessed defeat. Yet the influence of the Bible persists. Sometimes it is positive and direct, as in the stately harmonies of Kipling's "Recessional" or the labyrinthine beauties of Francis Thompson's "The Hound of Heaven"; sometimes, as in the extreme examples of James Thomson's "City of Dreadful Night" or John Davidson's "Ballad in Blank Verse," it appears only as an objective of revolt. During these latter years, as never before, the thought of man has journeyed afar into strange regions; yet throughout the range of our *belles lettres*,—our oratory, essays, novels, drama, and poetry,—the English Bible remains, as it has been, the source of truest and most enduring literary inspiration.

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